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THE COUNTER GUERRILLA OPERATIONS  
IN BOLIVIA--1967

BY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL CARLOS M. MARTIN

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USAWC MILITARY STUDIES PROGRAM PAPER

THE COUNTER GUERRILLA OPERATIONS IN BOLIVIA -1967

AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT

by

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# ABSTRACT

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The fact is that the Bolivian Armed Forces, with all the limitations presented by training, manpower, and equipment, but with outstanding leadership, assumed its legitimate role in the fight against the guerrillas and rapidly became a force capable of meeting this new type of threat. This paper is an anatomy of the counter guerrilla activities of the Bolivian Armed Forces and attempts to clear the record on the matter of U. S. intervention.

18 April 1988

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## COUNTERINSURGENCY OPERATIONS IN BOLIVIA - 1967

### PREFACE

Much has been written and speculated about the death in Bolivia of Ernesto "Che" Guevara. The lack of an official version and the silence of the Bolivian authorities concerning the events contributed to a distortion of the facts with which has deprived the Bolivian Army of the credit it deserves for putting down "Che" Guevara's insurgency.

The end of this leading Marxist ideologue and interpreter of guerrilla warfare theory brought with it continental repercussions.

This paper attempts to present, through Bolivian documents, a Bolivian perspective without any ideological distortion. The facts about to be presented are based mainly in the writings of Major General Gary Prado Salmon. His books are supported by official documents of the Bolivian Armed Forces; Ernesto "Che" Guevara's "Guerrilla Warfare"; and the Che's own diary about his operations in Bolivia.

## INTRODUCTION

Castro's revolution created the first communist enclave in the hemisphere. In his goals of political-military expansion, he conceived "Castrismo", that is the use of armed conflict, to obtain political power through guerrilla warfare ("Guerrilla Focuses").

In spite of occasional soviet opposition, Castro extended his leadership and support to the so called "liberation" movements which in some Latin American nations. Castro's intervention resulted in Cuba's expulsion from the Organization of American States.

The expulsion of Cuba from the OAS did not deter Castro from further intervention in hemispheric affairs. He continued to supply money, weapons, and special advisors to countries with "liberation" movements". At the same time, he brought to Cuba large numbers of young men interested in attending Cuban universities. In addition to education, these young men also received political indoctrination as well as military training. Thus, Castro was creating future combatants to join the "liberation" movements which he proposed to counter "Yankee Imperialism". (1)

Castro's everincreasing ties with the Soviet Union, forced the United States to declare a political and economic blockade of Cuba, a blockade which reached its climax during the 1962 "Missile Crisis".

U.S. pressure and increased military assistance reached the point where the U.S. promoted coup d'etats in order to assure anti-



communist governments in the hemisphere. At the same time, the activities of Castro and close followers became the subject of increased surveillance. It was Ernesto "Che" Guevara, a Cuban Argentinian, veteran of the Sierra Maestra and main theoretician of "Revolutionary Focuses", who most worried Ibero-American intelligence organisms. (2)

"Che" Guevara was last seen in public in March of 1965. Since that time, his activities are not known and are difficult to trace. His absence was skillfully exploited by friend and foe and his presence was rumored and connected with every Third World subversive uprising: in Africa, Central and South America. He was presumed to be involved with the Palestinian movement and even in Vietnam.

In an international atmosphere charged with violence and ideological confrontations, the first Tri-Continental Conference was held in Havana, Cuba, in 1962, for the purpose of establishing "solidarity among the peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America in the fight against U.S. imperialism, and to conquer and consolidate the independence of these three continents.", causing the America's to reflect with concern the seven years of Castro's regime and its effects in the politics of the region.

#### THE CLIMATE IN BOLIVIA

In 1952, under the progressive leadership of the National Revolutionary Movement (MNR), Bolivia begun a process known as the

"National Revolution". The politico-economic restructuring included the nationalization of mining concerns, took place in October 1952. In August 1953, land reform was implemented, making landowners of more than one million peasants who until then had lived in a state of peonage called "pongueaje", a rather peculiar form of slavery. Shortly thereafter, universal suffrage gave equal access to every citizen to the polls. Educational reforms placed the university system under direct government control. Education and training ceased to be the privilege of a few. These programs brought visible improvements in the political, economic, and social fields. By 1960 the people expected further social and economic improvements, the first phase of total restructuring having been achieved. The MNR wasted no time in announcing these improvements.

The decision of Doctor Victor Paz Estenssoro to once again run for president (after 1952 and 1956) fractured the then rock hard National Revolutionary Movement through ideological confrontations and even armed conflict between followers of different leaders within the party. To the violent opposition of the Falange Socialista Boliviana (FSB)- another political party - we must add other confrontations and subversive activities, resulting in the increasing and decisive intervention of the Armed Forces in an attempt to solve political problems.

Cuba's involvement in the internal affairs of Bolivia was facilitated by Juan Lechin Oquendo, life president of the powerful Central Obrera Boliviana (COB), a labor movement with decisive influence in national affairs. Lechin and the COB made

their support for Castro's revolution quite clear when they orchestrated public demonstrations against the government's decision to break diplomatic relations with Cuba.

In January of 1962, as representatives of the Organization of American States (OAS) met in Uruguay to consider sanctions against Castro's regime, La Paz and other major cities in Bolivia witnessed massive demonstrations with no other purpose than to pressure the government against sanctions and to support Cuba. At the same time, other subtle means of influence were being developed. By the end of 1962, hundreds of underprivileged Bolivian youngsters were invited, under the guise of scholarships, to study in Havana. These politically indoctrinated and militarily trained youngsters would return to Bolivia to lead "proletarian masses" and foment guerrilla movements. In spite of public denunciations about this plan, the government of Bolivia took no action. As a result of the intervention of the Armed Forces in the political life of the nation, a new political leader emerged in the figure of General Rene Barrientos Ortuno the Air Force Commander. Supported by the Armed Forces and a majority of the peasants from the Cochabamba Valley, his native region, General Barrientos became the Vice-Presidential candidate on Estenssoro's ticket.

As part of his electoral campaign, Barrientos organized massive demonstrations by the peasants, culminating with the signing of the Military-Peasant Anticomunist Pact, in the city of Ucurena (where the land reform act had been signed in 1953). This pact

was signed by leaders of the peasant movement and the military cell of the MNR. The parties agreed to deny access to communist leaders to the peasant movement and to defend national values.

The elections that took place in June of 1964 gave the presidency to Doctor Paz Estenssoro and the Vice-Presidency to General Barrientos. Upon being sworn in, the new government honored the decision of the OAS and broke diplomatic relations with Cuba. The announcement brought relief to the population which publicly demonstrated its support for the government's decision. The violent reaction of Cuba's representative in Bolivia sped their departure from the country, which took place on 22 August 1964.

In the meantime, the internal political situation was aggravated by the subversive activities of opposition leaders, such as Juan Lechin, Guevara Arze, and Siles Suazo. In their effort to oppose Paz Estenssoro, they did not hesitate to align themselves with the extreme left political parties. The constitutional government, somewhat eroded, was supported mainly by the Armed Forces who, after many interventions in political affairs, opted for replacing Paz Estenssoro with a military Junta headed by General Barrientos and General Alfredo Ovando Candia, head of the Armed Forces. The support for the Junta, manifested in public demonstrations was welcomed by the Armed Forces.

External influences also played a role in Bolivian life. The threat of Castro's Cuba as a result of their involvement with leftist movements in Latin America was reason for genuine

concern, particularly at high levels in the U.S. State Department at a time when the U.S. was becoming increasingly involved in Southeast Asia and the Middle East.

The State Department let the Pentagon handle the direction and execution of a policy to contain Castro's influence and aggression in Latin America. This resulted in increased military assistance to Latin America. Countries like Brazil, the Dominican Republic, and Bolivia, assumed more active efforts in an attempt to eliminate liberation movements organized by the communists.

The lack of direction of the newly installed Bolivian government provoked confrontations within its ranks, with the consequent loss of prestige. Leftist activities which included armed conflicts forced the government to declare a state of siege and to pass the National Security Act, aimed at stopping the activities of paramilitary forces by putting them under the jurisdiction of the military.

To bring the government within a constitutional framework, the Junta called elections in 1966. General Barrientos resigned from the Junta in order to be a presidential candidate. His fluency in Quechua (one of two Indian languages) and his grasp of the Indian idiosyncrasy earned him the support of the peasants (the majority of the country) and of the middle classes in urban areas. In the election, Barrientos won a handsome mandate which allowed him to choose his ministers and exert control over the congress. The military returned to the barracks leaving the nation in the hands of a new civilian political structure.

The international left wasted no time denouncing the Bolivian government as a military dictatorship and begun to organize in secret. The charges of the left did not receive the support of the people. They viewed their government as a constitutional one, democratically elected, that permitted freedom press and assembly, and did not use repressive measures. Foreign relations, particularly with the U.S. and other nations in the hemisphere, were cordial, mutually supporting, and within a spirit of cooperation. This relatively tranquil atmosphere was violently shaken by the ambush at Nancahuazu and the appearance of a Cuban guerrilla group commanded by Ernesto "Che" Guevara.

#### THE MILITARY CLIMATE

By the end of 1950, the Bolivian armed forces saw themselves equipped with material dating from the Chaco War of 1932-1935. The basic individual weapon was the Mausser 7.65 mm. Infantry support weapons consisted of a few Colt and Vickers machine guns and 81 mm. Brandt Spanish mortars. Artillery consisted of a few 75 and 105 mm. mountain pieces. A sizable quantity of this material had been distributed to peasant and workers militias who, to an extent, had replaced the armed forces during the early years of the 1952 Revolution. The Air Force consisted of a few T-6 trainers and C-47 transports.

The process of recovery of the armed forces was a slow one. It started in 1954 with the signing of a Military Assistance Pact with the United States. U.S. aid materialized in 1958 when the first group of Bolivian officers left for the School of the

Americas in Panama, for familiarization of the material they were about to receive. In 1959 the first shipment of material designed to equip an Infantry Battalion arrived. This equipment was distributed among three companies organic to units tasked with internal security (Presidential Guards Company - "Major Waldo Ballivian", a Squadron from the 4th Cavalry Regiment - "Ingavi", and a company from the NCO School - "Sgt Max Paredes"). The equipment consisted of M-1 rifles and m-1 carbines; a variety of machine guns (caliber .30); 60 mm. mortars; 3.5 rocket launchers; and 57 mm. recoilless rifles. It was this type of WWII equipment which was then being replaced in the U.S. that was now being used to modernize Latin American armed forces. A common doctrine was established in order to counter the threat emanating from Cuba.

For the Bolivian Armed Forces, the equipment received was professionally rewarding. The Army was reorganized with the creation of motorized units and highly specialized forces such as paratroopers and commandos. Within 5 years, a small, equipped, and well trained Army was put together to face internal problems caused by leaders and activists from the extreme left.

Early in the 60's the United States, in an effort to deal with the risks presented by Castro's activities, sponsored the first Conference of Army Chiefs from the Americas. This conference was held at West Point and had as its purpose an exchange of information, ideas, doctrinal coordination, joint action, internal security, etc. It was also agreed to hold conferences on a yearly basis.

In 1961 the Commander of the Southern Command visited several Latin American nations to verify the efficacy of military assistance in several areas, including Civic Action programs. Civic Action consisted in military personnel and equipment being utilized to build and repair schools, clinics, roads, water projects, and utilities. Civic action in Bolivia helped to improve the view of the population towards the Armed Forces who became more respected and were seen as friends of the people. The effects of these civic action programs were still being felt and played an important role during the subversive activities of "Che" Guevara.

Future officers and NCO's of the Bolivian Army benefited from the training received at the School of the Americas, which incorporated lessons learned by the U.S. in Laos, Vietnam, and from the analysis of Castro's campaign in Cuba. They were now better prepared to face this new threat. In addition, the creation in the U.S. of the Special Forces also answered the needs raised by this threat.

A Special Forces Team was sent to Bolivia in 1962 to run a training program. A new language emerged in the Bolivian military: incursions, ambushes, search and destroy, long range patrols, free fire zones, survival, etc. Officers and NCO's learned and developed new tactics to successfully counter irregular forces.

General Alfredo Ovando, Chief of the Armed Forces, upon returning from the 4th Army Chiefs Conference, provided improved definition and direction to US-Bolivian military relations. It is



significant that General Ovando was appointed to his post two days after General Boggart, Commander of the Southern Command, visited Bolivia to hold talks with the President and other civilian and military authorities. The consolidation of the government in 1964 was owed in part to the support received from the Pentagon. This support was designed to counter insurrections in the continent. Isolated guerrilla activities in Brazil and Argentina were quickly suppressed by the military, reaffirming the Pentagon's view that well trained and equipped armed forces could deter Castro's expansionism.

The VI Conference of Army Chiefs in 1965 provided Bolivia with a wealth of information concerning subversive activities in the continent and it served to increase her vigilance of leftist organizations.

In 1966 General Barrientos became the constitutional President of Bolivia. That same year saw subversive activities in neighboring Peru and Bolivia was forced to take precautionary border measures and the military was alerted to the threat. However, the general opinion was that Bolivia did not lend itself to subversive movements, an opinion based partially on the results of the Civic Action programs and popular support of the constitutional government.

General Porter, Commander of the Southern Command, during a visit to Bolivia stated that: "The U.S. will increase its military assistance to Bolivia because the assistance is properly utilized and Bolivia is capable to confront, if required, guerrilla activity". By the end of 1966 the situation had changed.

The combat units were well prepared for guerrilla warfare but warfare but at higher levels such major staffs, commands and service schools, the issue of subversion did not receive the attention it deserved and guerrilla warfare was studied within a theoretic framework, and superficially, at that. The General Staff failed to address the doctrinal issues clearly. A rift developed between subordinate officers trained in counterinsurgency and the higher command structure who still clung to notions of conventional warfare and resisted, or did not wish to understand, the need for changing traditional molds. In this atmosphere, the 1966 War Games held by the 7th Division in Cochabamba and which included the participation of higher staff and institutes, were held within a conventional warfare scenario and completely ignored the situation in the continent, with guerrilla activity from Guatemala to the Andes.

The second rift occurred between units with new U.S. equipment and those who still had the Chaco War leftovers. The U.S. equipped units were kept in cities and other critical areas to assure internal security and governmental stability, where as the others were sent to border zones far away from the cities where they only served as a government presence, without combat power or any semblance of a fighting force. It was under these circumstances, on 23 March 1967, shots fired by "Che" Guevara's guerrillas dyed the waters at Nancahuazu with Bolivian blood.

#### EVALUATION

The failure of the Cuban guerrillas in Bolivia can be explained

in many ways. For some, it was due to political factors, for others military, social, or economic. Each separate factor was critical.

This paper does not propose the discussion of tactical operations. Of more importance were the interrelationships of the various factors and their impact not only in Bolivia, but in the continent. To do this, we must analyze the theoretical framework beginning with writings of "Che" Guevara.

### THE GUERRILLA FRAMEWORK

Guevara the leader, considered by all an authority on "revolutionary warfare" against imperialist domination, in his book "Guerrilla Warfare" stated:

" The contributions of Cuba's Revolution to the mechanics of revolutionary movements in America are:

- a. Popular forces can defeat a conventional force.
- b. There is no need to wait for the proper conditions. Insurrection can be created.
- c. In underdeveloped America, the battlefields of armed conflicts must be in the countryside."

The first point of Guevara's has been achieved only once since Castro took over Cuba. In 1979, Nicaragua's highly motivated popular forces defeated Somoza's Army. However, Somoza's Army represented all the corruption of a tyrannical dictatorship and was little more than a pretorian guard tasked with maintaining the leader in power. Like Batista's Army, they did not possess the national spirit required of an armed force nor did they have any

degree of participation in social or popular events. Other armies who have faced, or are facing, guerrilla problems. Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, El Salvador, Venezuela, and others, have found the required internal support to make guerrilla warfare ineffective and have reduced it to a small problem localized in remote areas, without impacting appreciably on the life of the nation.

The second of Guevara's points has yet to be proven. The insurrections fabricated in the continent were unable to obtain popular support and thus were unable to create conditions for revolution. They did bloody American soil without confronting the colonial power, as was the stated objective. They caused destruction and the weakening of means of production, transport, and energy (affecting the population) as opposed to the oligarchies they were bent on challenging. "Che" Guevara's guerrilla activities in Bolivia did not create the conditions for a socialist revolution. On the contrary, it contributed to a large process of political and social disorientation which has affected the nation for many years, causing the challenged governments to fail to address the deep national problems.

With regard to the third point, generally speaking Latin America is witnessing a massive migration from the rural areas to urban areas, resulting in part from economic conditions. It is in urban areas where social definitions are made, where living conditions and survival are becoming increasingly more difficult. Almost all governments in the region have attempted to stimulate agriculture to stop this migration. Consequently, it is difficult to envision armed conflict in areas which have lost, or are

loosing, importance for the economy of the country.

"Where a government has assumed power through some form of popular consultation, whether fraudulent or not, and it maintains at least an appearance of legality, guerrilla seeds will not grow because the possibilities for a political solution still exists". (3)

If the above are the thoughts of "Che" Guevara, why then did he go to Bolivia? The Barrientos government was constitutional and popularly elected. Congress and other constitutional organisms were working. In short, the Barrientos government was de jure and popular. The guerrillas therefore could not hope for a victory given these circumstances.

There are other examples in the Americas. Colombia, supported by the legitimacy of its governments, has instantly countered guerrilla activity. The guerrillas of the "Shining Path" have not been able to topple the constitutional government of Peru. Not even in El Salvador, with all the limitations and problems, have the guerrillas been able to affect the governmental mechanism. "Guerrilla warfare is a conflict of the masses, it is a struggle of the people; the guerrilla, as an armed nucleus, is the vanguard combatant of the nucleus and its strength is derived from the masses. That the guerrilla must have the support of the whole of the local population is a quality "sine-qua non".

The people of Bolivia in 1967 did not choose to support the vanguard. Furthermore, it can also be said that the average person did not understand the guerrillas nor was in any way affected by

them and this explains the isolation and lack of support received by the forces of "Che" Guevara. No enthusiasm for the guerrillas could be found in any political or labor organization, nor in the common citizen. This translated to a lack of recruits to supplement the guerrilla force, bringing about their complete failure.

"From the beginning, it is essential for the guerrilla not to be destroyed". The precarious condition of the guerrillas from the very beginning was obvious. The main problem was not the lack of manpower but rather the lack of a secure base and supply routes that could guarantee survival. From the very beginning this guerrilla force carried within itself the seeds of self-destruction. Guevara lacked precision and his men lacked discipline.

"There are two necessary conditions in the life of a guerrilla: the absolute cooperation of the populace and a perfect knowledge of the terrain". (4)

The lack of cooperation from the people has already been discussed; it practically did not exist. Having lost the operations base to the regular forces, Guevara's guerrillas wondered about and were unable to establish any kind of contact with the locals. In fact, they had to detain some peasants to avoid being turned in to the Army. As far as knowledge of the terrain is concerned, the terrain was unknown with the exception of the route that "Che" had reconnoitered in February of 1967. As evidenced in his campaign diary, they were constantly lost, looking for passage through the most difficult terrain, tired, and wasting time looking for reference points or some village to

obtain supplies. Having entered the jurisdiction of the 8th Army Division (Florida, Samaipata, Alto Seco, La Higuera), the lack of knowledge of the terrain and of the social characteristics of the local population, made them commit mistake after mistake, culminating in "El Churo".

"A strong operations base must be established and continually reinforced during the course of operations". (5)

The guerrilla base at Nancahuazu was never solidly established. An alternate base was not even considered. After the first ambush, overconfidence led them to believe that the Army could not enter their base. The Bolivian Army reacted by cordoning the perimeter and entering the base, forcing the guerrillas to leave. Che departed to escort Regis Debray (a French Journalist) and Ciro Roberto Bustos (an Argentinian journalist) from the operations zone and as well to seek relief from the pressure placed on them by the regulars. The loss of the base deprived the guerrillas of their supplies.

Not having an alternate base, or a secure refuge, the guerrillas became nomads and weakened as a force. Insurgents need periods of rest in safe areas to regain energy, tend the wounded, and receive and train new men. With the loss of the Nancahuazu base, there were no other areas available. "The lines of communications with the outside must have a series of intermediary points, with trusted people, where supplies can be stored and where the guerrilla can hide at a determined moment "(6). The early discovery of the guerrillas caused Guevara's "Instructions

to Urban Cells", taken out of the base by Loyola Guzman (Bolivian), were never implemented.

Cells of Cochabamba, Sucre, Camiri, and Santa Cruz, were selected by Guevara as support bases, but communications with the interior of the zone of operations did not have "intermediary points" nor trusted agents. After the departure of Debray and Bustos, the isolation of the guerrillas became total.

"There must be established supply routes in order to keep a minimum of supplies in the bases, in order to prevent unpleasant contingencies" (7).

There being no urban supply net as envisioned, resupply became critical. Guevara's men could only count with what was available in the zone, which was not much due to the low density population. Coupled with the loyalty of the Army, the guerrillas possibilities were minimal. Other supplies, such as medicine, clothing, etc. practically did not exist, forcing the guerrillas to engage in dangerous forays such as the one at Samaipata which only accomplished a propaganda coup.

The isolation of the guerrillas, caused initially by the regular forces, negated the establishment of a secured logistical net, leaving them in a zone of scarce resources and population, abandoned to their own fate.

"The social composition of the guerrilla force must parallel that of the area of operations. That is, the nucleus of the guerrilla force must be the peasant." (8)

The guerrilla force at Nancahuazu contained all kinds of people except peasants. Worst yet, no one was originally from the



zone. Besides the foreigners, which joined the guerrillas for other reasons, the only Bolivian who claimed to be a peasant was Antonio Dominguez Flores, born in Beni, and who for the past 5 years had not performed any peasant activities. The rest were all miners, students, or artisans, used to the frigid weather of the Altiplano. Exposed to the tropic, desertions during the acclimatation period surprised no one. This was a decisive negative factor for "Che" as all of his staff were foreigners.

"A guerrilla force must never be fractioned". (9)

Failure to observe the above premise was another fundamental error. Having been located and forced to abandon their operational base, "Che" opted for taking everybody out and to operate in the area of Muyumpampa" (10), an area with which they were unfamiliar. Three days later he decided to go straight to Muyumpampa in order to get Debray and Bustos out and left his second in command, Commander Juan Acuna Nunez (Cuban) in charge of the rear area, "remain in the zone and wait till we return" (11), without establishing alternate contact points.

The fractioning of the force in two groups debilitated it and caused its destruction by parts. For four months they searched for each other and never met again. "Che" had lost his most loyal lieutenant, Acuna Nunez, who had served under him since the Sierra Maestra days in 1958.

"The organization of an insurrectional movement is important in two fronts: internal and external. On the external front the functions are different, i.e. propaganda must be nationally

oriented, must exploit the achievements of the guerrillas as a motivating factors for the peasants and laborers to join the movement, and to issue news releases of any victories on this front."

"Every viable vehicle should be used to disseminate the revolutionary idea, and this must be done in depth. It also carries with it the equipment and organization required". (12)

The subversive organization on the external front crumbled as soon as the guerrillas were discovered and the government initiated effective security measures. The detention and confinement suspect labor and political leaders caused the propaganda to be ineffective. Instructions to the "cells" and communiques from the area of operations were not disseminated; hence the lack of knowledge concerning the movement and its objectives. The press did report the movement's action and victories without any positive effect for the guerrillas.

"The most effective propaganda is the one given within the guerrilla's area of operations. Emphasis must be given to ideas appealing to the locals, explaining the theory behind the facts known to them". (13)

The few contacts with area locals did not produce any favorable effects. The guerrillas did instill fear, due to natural distrust of the locals of outsiders. The conduct of the locals was not guided by fears of reprisal from the Army. The guerrillas, forced to resupply themselves with the scarce items available in the area did not establish a solid rapport with

the peasants. As the peasants began to increasingly denounce the guerrillas, their contacts with them became less frequent, further increasing the isolation of the guerrillas.

"The guerrilla is supported by the peasant and labor masses. In the absence of this premise, there cannot be guerrilla warfare". (14)

Without a doubt, the guerrillas never enjoyed the required popular support, a principal factor of their defeat.

"Armies organized and equipped for conventional warfare are the force supporting the exploiting classes. When faced with non-conventional warfare, outside their natural scenario, these armies become powerless; they lose ten men for each guerrilla lost and their morale is quickly lost as they face an invincible and unbeatable enemy who deprives them of the use of classroom tactics and other fancy items of warfare, of which they brag so much about and used to put down workers and students in the cities" (Fidel Castro, Second Habana Declaration, 1966).

This concept suffered a radical change after the initial skirmishes at Nancahuazu and Iripitti. True, the Bolivian Army was not prepared for unconventional operations at the very beginning, but few months later and due to sheer will power and decisiveness, their position was substantially improved. The casualty ratio by the end of the campaign was two guerrillas for one regular, a ratio never seen before anywhere. This indicated the degree of flexibility and adaptability reached by the Bolivian Army.

"If the military situation is difficult initially, so is the political situation; and if a single military error can end the force, a political error can stop its development for long periods". (15)

Two related events originated the political error which affected the development of the guerrilla. First, they attempted to hide from the leadership of the Bolivian Communist Party (PCB) the real objectives of the insurgency. In the early stages of contact with PCB leaders, the presence of "Che" and his men was presented as a symbol of support for the struggle of local communists against Barriento's regime and designed to create favorable conditions for a general insurrection. The international character of the mission, which intended to create a multiregional training center which, after assuming control of the country would spread the guerrillas to other nations, was never made known. The objective of organizing a politico-military training center at Nancahuazu was never mentioned.

Secondly, the deep rooted nationalism of the Bolivians, and their social characteristics, were ignored. The Cubans believed that Bolivia was a country ripe for violent change and that political and labor organizations would join in the struggle and support the insurgents, and that the Armed Forces, were just small units, not prepared for irregular warfare. Hence the disagreement between the general secretary of the PCB who argued for a "national command" of the rebel forces and the Cubans. The failure to understand the Bolivian idiosyncrasy, coupled with the

arrogant and messianic attitude of "Che" Guevara, who argued that "America was his country" and that his name alone was sufficient to attract recruits, constituted the initial failures.

### The Military Framework

#### Organization

The organization of the Bolivian Armed Forces in 1967 consisted of a unified command under the undisputed authority of General Ovando Candia, who had held the position since 1962. The joint staff, consisting of senior officers from all three services did not play a role in the counterinsurgency operations since the Army had been tasked for this, supported by the Bolivian Air Force and a company of Marines from the Navy. Thus, the Army was responsible for planning and executing the anti-guerrilla operations. Initially this was a difficult task because of the lack information concerning the enemy and the terrain in which they operated. Additionally there was a shortage of special equipment needed for this type of warfare.

The base at Nancahuazu was within the jurisdiction of the 4th Division at Camiri. This division was reinforced with elements from other units and officers were sent in to fill all the vacant staff positions. The military assistance received in 1962, aimed at countering a Castroist model, did not prove sufficient at the beginning of the operations. Only those units stationed in western Bolivia and main cities like La Paz, Oruro, Cochabamba, were organized and equipped to operate in matters of internal security but this was in a climate and terrain totally different

from the southeast. Having recognized this, training was improved at all levels, including civic action, with emphasis in knowledge of the terrain.

### Execution

The declarations of Regis Debray corroborated the international aspect of the movement and its strategic schema. An analysis of the situation indicated that:

- The guerrilla forces in southeastern Bolivia was a Cuban-led effort designed to trigger the intervention of U. S. troops in Bolivia and later in other countries.

- The government was able to stunt the growth of the guerrilla movement by controlling both operational areas and potentially subversive organizations. In coordination with internal security agencies, the Armed Forces were able to deny any possibility of U.S. intervention in the region.

- The government was able to deny the guerrillas the support of the populace both in urban and rural areas by increasing civic action activities including those envisioned in the Army-Peasant Pact. Particular attention was paid to the areas near the guerrilla's base and areas of potential use by the guerrillas (Alto Beni, Chapare).

- The decision was made to contain the guerrilla problem within a limited framework, both informative and operative, in order to deny them access to means of communications (press, radio, TV). The above was complemented with the following:

- Accelerated Army training in counterinsurgency operations

in order to develop a viable force, capable of operating in any terrain or climate in Bolivia.

- Psychological training for the military geared to counter-act subversive propaganda.

Two other tasks were accomplished by the Chief of the Armed Forces:

- At the international level, there were increased and improved exchange of information and intelligence, and an increased surveillance over known extremists in order to deny them any possibilities of creating new guerrilla focuses.

- At the national level, a psychological campaign was organized and implemented to reaffirm support for the Army and maintain a solid civic spirit. These actions contributed to the failure of the guerrilla effort.

### Logistics

The lack of a suitable logistics system to support counterinsurgency operations became evident from the very beginning, (1) One hundred men were deployed to Luganillas in civilian trucks, (2) Troops travelled on foot carrying their pots and pans, (3) Long range patrols could not operate for lack of supplies.

Mobility and the size of the area of operations were thus affected by logistical limitations. This occurred throughout the operation. Lack of supplies was a common problem to all units and a matter difficult to solve. The various calibers of ammunition

used by the Army, coupled with the lack of transport, made supplies scarce and further limited the amount of time units could spend in actual operations.

### Intelligence

The intelligence received in the early stages consisted of separate reports from different nations. In 1964 the exchange of information had become constant but it was still of a general character.

Internally, intelligence organizations did not detect the arrival of the guerrilla force advanced party which had arrived in 1966 to start developing contacts and reconnoitering the terrain. Further, they did not connect these activities with the PCB. Only in January of 1967 was information received pertaining to recruiting efforts by a miner named Moises Guevara. This resulted in a directive requiring that 10 persons, including Moises Guevara and Simon Cuba, be surveilled. However, no connection with Castro was made. This surveillance finally paid off when Moises Guevara and others were detected in Camiri and later moving to Nancahuazu.

In the tactical arena, two sources of intelligence were used: the natives to the area and Army personnel in civilian clothes charged with surveilling the area of each unit to detect the present and/or activities of guerrillas. This surveillance constantly produced good results, without pressure on the troops or promises of rewards. These were key factors in Guevara's defeat.

### Politics



There were difficulties in the political arena. The ambush at Nancahuazu produced different opinions between those charged with political responsibilities and those charged with military responsibilities. On one hand Barrientos considered the guerrillas as a personal affront and was bent on a political campaign to deny them the support of the peasants (which he achieved). The Army, on the other hand, had a more cautious approach. It wanted to reduce the impact of the guerrillas to a manageable state, and to keep the activities of the military rather quiet, clashing with Barrientos who was accustomed to daily press declarations, sometimes without all the available information. The damage made by the press could not be repaired.

Barrientos imposed his will to neutralize the political parties. To the surprise of many, he accomplished his objective of total rejection of the guerrillas and having done so, he easily dominated the political stage. At the international level he projected himself well and was able to obtain assistance from neighboring countries and the U.S., to fight the guerrillas and control the situation. Barrientos's enthusiasm rubbed off on the reserved and cautious General Ovando who did not hesitate to announce that the guerrillas had been destroyed upon learning that they had been isolated. The Army Chief, conscious of the impact of the guerrillas and their effect on the military, and properly guided the counterinsurgency operations.

The death of "Che" Guevara obviated the above efforts. Today's speculations are due to the fact that no decision was made on

what to do with the guerrilla leader once captured and the lack of coordination by different authorities to present a coherent account of what happened.

### CONCLUSIONS

What has been so briefly mentioned here served as an indelible experience to the Armed Forces to prevent and reduce this type of warfare. The experiences gained by the Armed Forces will now be discussed in an attempt to clearly establish what happened during the 1976 counterinsurgency operation.

#### Mobilization

No mobilization of reserves took place. Units from the areas of operations, organic to the 4th and 8th divisions were utilized.

At the beginning of the insurgency the 4th Division had a strength of 1103. The reinforced from outside units from La Paz, Oruro, and Cochabamba, did not exceed 500 men. When the units moved to the area of the 8th Division, the reinforcements went with them. This was the extent of mobilization: reinforcement through organic and active units. This reinforcement was not problem free as we shall see.

The guerrillas were discovered during the time (March-April 1968) when soldiers having completed their mandatory military obligation were being discharged. The year group of 1966 was undergoing military training when the ambush at Nancahuazu took

place, resulting in an extension to soldiers from several units, including troops from the CITE (Centro de Instruccion de Tropas Especiales - paratroopers) who were sent as reinforcements to the guerrilla zone.

The contingent from 1966 felt that they fulfilled their military obligation and wanted to return home, to school, etc. For some, this was out of the question. Only one disciplinary problem arose as a result of the extension of military service: a company from the "Bolivar" Regiment. After the ambush at Iripity at the end of April 1967, this unit mutineered, but without major consequences and the disciplinary mechanism was put in effect.

The 1967 contingent reported for duty in March and was subject to intensive training which allowed, by the end of May, to begin discharging those who had been extended.

Another problem resulted from the nature of military training. The contingent of 1966 had been trained for conventional warfare and at battalion level. Units from La Paz, Oruro, and Cochabamba had been trained for mountain and valley warfare. Units from the 4th and 8th Divisions were involved in civic action. Consequently the level of training required for an effective counterinsurgency was very low. Understrength, they lacked officers, NCO's, and other personnel shortages caused massive realignment in order to fill staff and command positions. This resulted in the temporary use of service school personnel (Advanced Course, Basic Course, etc.) to obtain the number of officers and NCO's required.

The Majority of the Bolivian Army of 1967 consisted of infantry units. Cavalry and Artillery units were also used as infantry elements. Assault troops and airborne units distinguished themselves.

Airborne training was given in Cochabamba at the Centro the Instruccion de Tropas Especiales (CITE). Geographically, the training was oriented to the valleys and not prepared for air drops over the guerrilla area. The two CITE companies utilized, CITE-1 and 2, distinguished themselves in an infantry role due their leadership and high sprit d'corps.

Assault troops such as Ranger units, trained in different terrain, served equally well once committed against the guerrillas. The 1st Ranger Company quickly demonstrated its level of training, responsibility, and capacity to fight. Units from the 4th Division, in spite of their lack of training, carried on their traditions, dating back to the Chaco War, of valor and heroism. Worth mentioning is the role in the counterinsurgency of the regiments "Campos", "Boqueron", and the First Cavalry Regiment "Abaroa". Bolivia did produce a properly trained anti-guerrilla element until almost the end of the operation. The 12th Infantry Regiment, "Manchego", after sixteen weeks of intensive training given by a USSF Training Team from Panama, commanded by Major Ralph Shelton, was ready for action.

In the event the guerrilla warfare extended to other parts of the territory, the 3rd and 5th Divisions were tasked with training two companies each in anti-guerrilla warfare. Two of these companies were later used to reinforce the 4th Division.

Under these conditions, and without adequate intelligence, the Army confronted the guerrillas during the most difficult phase. Towards the end, when the guerrillas had been checked, better prepared units became available. To speak of thousands of soldiers to cordon the guerrillas is to lose perspective and ignore the means. The nature of the area of operations caused the regulars to disperse and become diluted, creating difficult problems to the command.

### Intelligence

The staff of the divisions at Santa Cruz and Camiri did not have the required personnel for routine intelligence activities. The DIC (Criminal Investigation Division) provided intelligence concerning the activities of labor leaders and leftist politicians. The information that was received, however, had no major value. The government did not know that an advanced party had arrived in Bolivia and was establishing contacts with the Bolivian left. There were no reasons to think that under the current political conditions of Bolivia an insurgent movement could arise, much less one directed from the outside. Initial information concerning guerrilla activity was received from sources who had nothing to do with intelligence. It was personnel from the State Oil Concern who first detected the guerrillas in the southeast and sounded the alarm. Military intelligence efforts were then channeled towards the identification of the guerrillas and their contacts with the outside.

The capture of guerrilla deserters made identification easy.

The deserters gave away the order of battle, valuable information to quantify the problem. The presence of "Che" Guevara was made known. Regis Debray would ultimately reveal Guevara's activities for political exploitation. This helped the to portray Guevara as a foreigner meddling in the internal affairs of Bolivia.

Combat intelligence was furnished by units operating in the field, using locals and soldiers in civilian clothes, as mentioned before. The Bolivian Police was also used in this role. Some versions made public linking the CIA and the Pentagon with Bolivia's counterinsurgency effort, particularly in the area of intelligence gathering, are not exact and far from being true. It was Bolivian intelligence that paid off.

The strategic intelligence agreed upon at the Army Chiefs Conferences was kept at a normal level and used to investigate some guerrilla activities. For example, the Uruguayan, Ecuadorian, and Panamenian passports used by the guerrillas to get into Bolivia served to point out flaws in these nation's systems and helped to correct the situation. The report Bolivia made at the VIII Conference of American Armies in Rio de Janeiro, 1968, served to demonstrate the tactics and techniques used by Castro in his continental adventures and to plan for the future.

#### Weapons Used

Military assistance was discussed in paragraph 3, supra. As the Bolivian Army re-equipped and reorganized, the guerrillas

arrived. The 4th and 8th Divisions had not received any new equipment since they had been given the lowest priority, leaving at the beginning of the operations the Chaco War vintage 7.65 mm. Mausser. As mentioned by "Che" Guevara in his diary, the inferiority of this weapon was visible and could not compare with high powered late model automatic weapons the guerrillas possessed. It was after Nancahuazu and Iripiti that MAF equipment started to trickle in, as well as Argentinian and Swiss rifles. With this limited means, Bolivia faced and destroyed the insurgency.

### Supplies

The basic staple of the Bolivian soldier is a thick corn based soup called "lagua", in which meat, bacon, etc. is cooked. This diet has worked well during normal times but proved impractical during counter-guerrilla operations. C-Rations were obtained from the U.S. and Brasil and after the initial newness, during which the troops rejected them, however, they did serve their purpose.

During the final phase of the counterinsurgency Bolivia experimented with its own brand of C-rations. This consisted of a form of some dehydrated "lagua". The quantities and taste were readily accepted but cooking them was a disadvantage. The end of the campaign stopped further experimentation but the point was clearly made for the need of a combat ration that met the habits and taste of the Bolivian soldier.

The resupply of ammunition was another problem. With different units from different parts of the country, equipped with different weapons, confusion was inescapable. At one time,

individual weapons consisted of 4 different calibers and it often occurred that units were issued the wrong caliber of ammunition, leaving them with reduced firepower.

#### Transport

At the beginning of the operations, each divisional unit had a 2.5 ton truck, MAP issue and intended for civic action. The shortage of vehicles resulted in civilian trucks being contracted for supply missions. The problem was compounded by the lack of adequate roads and primitive and modern methods of resupply had to be used: men on foot and helicopters.

The Cochabamba-Sucre-Camiri road became the main supply route for the 4th Division and the Cochabamba-Santa Cruz road for the 8th. Both roads were secured.

#### Medical

In the area of combat services support, medical support was the most difficult. Prior to the hostilities, each division had one or two general practitioners assisted by medics and who dealt mainly with minor injuries. Initial casualties had to be evacuated to Santa Cruz or Cochabamba. After the first ambush, it was evident that the Medical Corps had to be reorganized in a manner in which combat medical support would be adequate.

The lack of medical personnel was obvious. Doctors worked part-time for the Army. Their commitments made mobilization difficult. The solution was to draft the recent graduating class from medical school and with this added manpower, two field hospitals were organized by the 4th Division and medical



personnel was further assigned to small units.

Lack of medical care was depressing, particularly for troops originating from western Bolivia. Their initial weeks in the zone of operations were very difficult; they were not used to insect bites and the wounds caused by the vegetation. Dehydration also took its toll. Iodine was for the most part the only medicine available to treat wounds. Combat casualties suffered from the lack of helicopter support, lack communications means, and the difficulty of the terrain. Many died because of the unavailable medical care with the consequent effect in the morale of the troops. In spite of the limitations, medical personnel did their best with what they had. One example of their dedication to duty was the case of Medic Franz Muriel, Second Ranger Bn., who died attempting to retrieve a wounded soldier in the battle of Naranjal.

#### Communications

This was a major problem from the beginning. The military communications system consisted of a fixed net linking the major commands with La Paz. The system was vulnerable to jamming and interception. Regiments were not in the net nor did they have any radios available, at any level. The initial solution was to link combat units using AN/GRC-9 from the Military Geodetic Service. This equipment proved very heavy for foot patrols and communications were difficult to establish. Many units became isolated for lack of radios and had to link up again through the use of messengers and of message drops made by the Air Force.

Some CITE units had PRC-10 and PRC-6's, also MAP issue, but the terrain drastically reduced the range and the lack of spare batteries became a problem. The messenger became the most expeditious mean of communication.

#### Foreign Intervention

Contrary to popular belief, foreign intervention, specifically U.S., played no direct role and had no impact in Bolivia's operations.

While the objective of "Che" Guevara was to cause U.S. intervention, specifically U.S. troops on Bolivian soil, in order to create "two, three, or ten Vietnams" and to convert the Andes into the "Sierra Maestra of America", it did not work. The Bolivian Army was able, from the beginning, to isolate the guerrillas and to reduce their impact to a national problem in spite of the foreign connection. Once Bolivian intelligence identified the guerrillas, foreign assistance was sought, with the following results:

- 1967 MAP equipment was redistributed
- The U.S. sent a mobile SF training team. The instructors remained in the town of La Esperanza.
- U.S. personnel was not allowed in the area of operations
- MAP assistance was expanded to include C-rations and ammunition.

All assistance was made within an established framework of cooperation already in place. Bolivia was not an exception for

military assistance and military missions have almost always existed in Latin America and is not confined to the U.S. Missions alone. Brasil has a mission in Paraguay; Chile has a mission in Ecuador; Argentina has a mission in Bolivia, to name a few. Military cooperation in the Americas is an established and permanent fact.

CIA participation in the conflict is an issue which has never been put in the right context. In mid-September 1967, when the defeat of the guerrillas was certain, the U.S. offered two CIA agents to help in the identification of the guerrillas. The agents, Felix Ramos and Eduardo Gonzales, both Cubans, were supposed to have known "Che". They arrived in Santa Cruz and were assigned to the intelligence section of the 8th Division. In that capacity, they were taken to the forward command post by the Division Commander. They did not go in with the troops. On 9 October, after "Che" had been killed, Felix Ramos, with the Division Commander, arrived by helicopter in La Higuera for the purpose of establishing a proper identification. Having done so, he was returned to Vallegrande and a few hours later, both cubans left for Washington. That was the extent of the U.S. participation in the counterinsurgency operations.

Brazil and Argentina, neighboring countries, had a stake in the events taking place in Bolivia and had a need to establish an exchange of intelligence with Bolivia. Since Nancagua, they followed the events without intervening. They provided, upon the request of Bolivia, food and weapons.

The above constitute the foreign support to Bolivia. There

was no direct action, no special equipment, no massive logistics effort. The Bolivians suffered alone.

### The Peasants

A fundamental factor in guerrilla warfare is the peasant. His participation and support will tilt the balance to the side they choose. The success of the military against "Che" in 1967 is owed substantially to the attitude of the peasants. From the beginning they were against the insurgency, as individuals or as groups. The peasants could be counted upon to fight the insurgents, as demonstrated by the thousands who volunteered to fight alongside the regular Army, an offer that the Army saw more as a problem than a practical matter. The loyalty of the peasants for General Barrientos was never questioned.

In area of operations the peasants organized themselves to deny the guerrillas any support. The men agreed to hide when the guerrillas came, for fear of being recruited or taken hostage. Old men, women, and children were the only people in sight when the guerrillas came into a village. However, when the regulars arrived, everybody welcome them, without fears.

With the exception of Honorato Rojas, the Army did not offer any rewards nor did it buy information concerning the guerrillas. Their cooperation was obtained by appealing to their patriotism and national pride. The insurgents had a negative attitude; took hostages; requisitioned cattle; made threats; killed people, activities not conducive to obtaining any support.

### The Population

For Bolivia, a nation accustomed to political upheavals, the birth and development of an insurgent movement in 1967 was not a priority concern. Initially, novelty and curiosity aggrandized the guerrilla, particularly after the events at Nancahuazu and Iripitv. When the guerrillas became worn out and isolated, they were no longer news. They regained only sporadically the limelight during some events such as Samaipata, Vado de Yeso, etc.

During the operations, the large majority of the people were not touched by the guerrilla war. The events took place far away, in areas with few inhabitants, without an impact in daily Bolivian life. The government saw no reasons to take special control measures, which allowed a climate of tranquillity to prevail in the country. Only once, during a military operation in the mines, did a confrontation outside the area of operations take place. The politicians had no role to play. For fear of being connected with outsiders, they remained silent for the most part.

### Conclusion

The lessons learned is what is left, with a legitimate sense of pride lingering in the military ranks.

Whether people are willing to admit it or, the Bolivian Army, thought to be "the worst army in Latin America", obtained a decisive victory in the fight against the guerrillas and their ideologues. The 1967 counterinsurgency campaign is the most important armed conflict of Bolivia since the Chaco War. The errors, failures, all the negatives, are covered by the victory, a victory obtained by the military, aware of their duty to

confront any attempt to use Bolivian soil for experiments alien to them.

Those who participated in the campaign, those who shared the hunger, dangers, fear of defeat, the long hours, learned to love the peasant and acquired a solid respect for the peasants, traditions, which include faith in the future and love of country. The future will have to be built by the Bolivians themselves, not with weapons, but by hand, side by side, with ingenuity, initiative, work, and patriotism.

The changes that must be made in Bolivia do not require the violence of Nancahuazu or El Churo. They only bring pain and suffering. The blood lost in the campaign has taught us a lesson: duty to country is permanent in peace or war.

Col. Carlos Macias  
Bolivia  
Seminar 5

### NOTES

- (1) During the military operations in 1967, several Bolivian students living in Havana, were identified as members of the insurgency led by Ernesto Guevara.
- (2) "Revolutionary Focuses" are explained in paragraph 4 of this paper.
- (3) "Guerrilla Warfare" - Ernesto "Che" Guevara - Obra Revolucionaria Ediciones ERA, Mexico, Nov. 1967.
- (4) Ob. cit.
- (5) Idem.
- (6) Id.
- (7) Id.
- (8) Id.
- (9) Id.
- (10) Che Guevara's Diary - Notes on April 14, 1967
- (11) Idem. Notes on April 17, 1967
- (12) "Guerrilla Warfare" - Ernesto "Che" Guevara - cited.
- (13) Idem.
- (14) Id.
- (15) Id.

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